

# Mexican immigrants' views on the Spanish dialects in Mexico: a language attitudes study

Sarah Stockler

Since the 1960s, sociolinguists have been examining the social factors that influence language variation and the attitudes speakers have towards those variations. In this study, the language attitudes about the perceived Spanish dialects in Mexico are analyzed using a map-task. A group of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. was asked to draw on a map of Mexico where they felt that people speak Spanish differently. They were then asked to explain/elaborate on the divisions that they drew. These maps and interviews were used to determine the perceived major dialects of Mexican Spanish according to the majority of participants. Perceptions of dialects are measured via reoccurring themes that were brought up by a majority of interviewees. Salient themes include language contact, such as influence of English or indigenous languages, and whether a dialect was deemed urban or rural.

**Keywords:** language attitudes, perceptual dialectology, Mexican Spanish, Spanish variation.

*Percepciones de los inmigrantes mexicanos de los dialectos del español de México: un estudio de actitudes lingüísticas.* Desde los años 60, los sociolingüistas han estudiado los factores sociales que influyen en la variación lingüística y las actitudes de los hablantes hacia esa variación. En este estudio, se analizan, usando una técnica de mapeo, las actitudes lingüísticas hacia los dialectos percibidos del español en México. Se pidió a un grupo de inmigrantes mexicanos que marcara en un mapa de México dónde consideraban ellos que la gente habla español de manera diferente. Asimismo, se les solicitó que explicaran las divisiones que habían establecido. Estos mapas, así como diferentes entrevistas, fueron empleados para determinar los principales dialectos percibidos de acuerdo con la mayoría de los participantes. Las percepciones de los dialectos se midieron a través de temas recurrentes que habían sido mencionados por la mayoría de los entrevistados. Algunos de los temas destacados fueron el contacto de lenguas, la influencia del inglés, las lenguas indígenas o la consideración de un dialecto como urbano o rural.

**Palabras claves:** actitudes lingüísticas, dialectología percetiva, español de México, variación del español.

## Introduction

Agha (2005: 38) defines enregisterment as “processes whereby distinct forms of speech come to be socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users”. In other words, enregistered dialects are talked about, while speakers tend to not discuss dialects that are not enregistered. Enregistered dialects in the U.S. include ‘Pittsburghese’ (Johnstone 2009) and Californian (Podesva 2011) to name a few.

So what dialects are enregistered for native Spanish speakers? And what opinions exist about those enregistered dialects? This study specifically investigates the major dialect areas of Mexican Spanish according to the native speakers themselves (who have since immigrated to the U.S.) and their attitudes towards those dialects. In the current study, attitudes came out both as comments on language as well as explicit statements about different ethnic and social groups. The main speech categories for these Mexican speakers fell under Urban and Rural.

According to Martín Butragueño (2014: 1355), the question of the Spanish dialectal zones in Mexico has still not been resolved despite years of research on the subject. Some of the most noted work done on Mexican dialectology is that of Lope Blanch in the *Atlas lingüístico de México* (1990). The current study seeks to help resolve the question of Mexican dialectology, but from a language attitudes perspective. Past studies have presented Mexico as if it is one big speech community with a shared “Mexican Spanish” dialect (Figueroa 2003; Freeman 1983). However there has been work done to refute the notion of a uniform speech community in Mexico (Lope Blanch 1999; Erdösová 2011) on to which the current study will build.

## Literature review

Several previous language attitudes studies done on Mexican Spanish have focused on specific communities including along the U.S./Mexico border (Galindo 1996; Hidalgo 1986), high/lowlands of Michoacán (Santa Ana and Parodi 1998), and a migrant community in the Midwestern U.S. along with its origin community in Mexico (Matus-Mendoza 2002). More recently, perceptual dialectology studies have expanded to include the whole of Mexico (Erdösová 2011; Morúa Leyva

and Serrano 2004; Serrano forthcoming). These studies reflected results in the current study: there is an urban variety (Mexico City, according to some) of Spanish that is seen as more educated and correct than the other 'rural' varieties. The view of contact varieties varied. In Galindo (1996) and Hidalgo (1986), contact, English influenced varieties were deemed less correct and less educated but in the circulatory migrating population in Matus-Mendoza (2002) the English influence found in returning migrants' Spanish was found to hold linguistic power and prestige. In Montes-Alcalá (2000), findings suggest that younger, college-age generation tends to feel generally positive towards code-switching and those who use it in their speech see it as a reflection of their identity.

Other studies deal with Mexican Spanish within the U.S. context (Flores 1975) and within the context of the other Spanish varieties (Figueroa 2003). In both, English influence/mixing/or contact was viewed as negative and low-prestige.

The present study will investigate the language attitudes held by Mexican immigrants in Columbus, Ohio about Spanish spoken throughout the whole of Mexico. These attitudes were determined by a map-task along with the interview that took place during and/or after said task. Through the task and interview, the speakers themselves determined where the dialects of Mexico fall on the map while adding novel information to this map such as what attitudes and beliefs exist about these dialects. Accompanying the divisions on the dialectal map, we now have which ones are enregistered, which ones most likely aren't, and what is really important to the speaker of Mexican Spanish.

## Methods

This survey is based on data collected from 21 Mexican-born respondents who immigrated to the U.S., all of whom reside in Columbus, Ohio. Participants included fifteen men and six women, ranging in age from 20-41 years old. Participants' places of origin included Northern Mexico (n=2), Central Mexico (n=10), Mexico's capital city (n=4), and Southern Mexico (n=5). Justification for grouping participants using these geographic labels will be given later. For future study into this topic, it would be desirable to have a wider variety of home areas as well as more balance in the genders. Levels of education included no formal education (n=1), some primary school (n=1), finished primary school (n=3), some high school (n=2), completed high school (n=8), technical school (n=1), some college (n=2) and college degree (n=3). While a wider than expected range of education levels was reported, this may

have been confounded by the context of the participants as migrants. All but one of the participants was employed in the food service industry despite their educational background. Further biographical information is available in Appendix 1. Figures 1 and 2 give respondents' pseudonyms correlated with their home area.

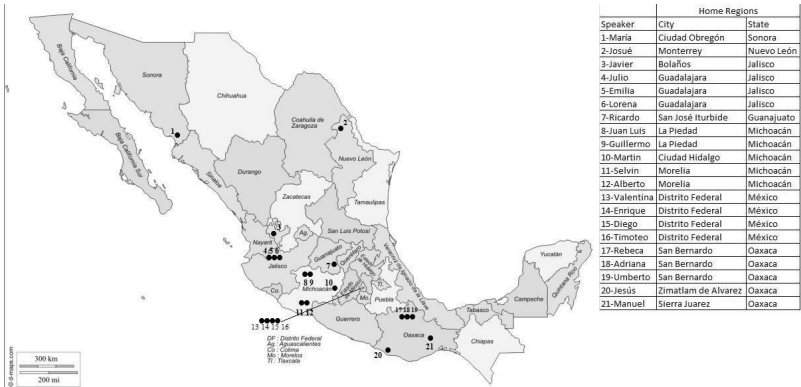


Figure 1. Map of participants' home regions  
Figure 2. Participants' pseudonyms and cities and states of origin

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed, with the exception of five participants who opted out of the recording in which case the interviewer took notes during the task. The interviews were then analyzed according to reoccurring themes and labels mentioned by speakers.

The task was presented to participants as follows:

1. Participants were presented with a brief paragraph (in Spanish) explaining the goal of the project to investigate the different dialects of Spanish in Mexico.
2. Participants were then given a map of Mexico (examples seen in Appendix 2) and were instructed to mark where they believed the differing speech is found in Mexico (loosely based on Preston 1996). Interviews of those participants who agreed to it were recorded using a LogiTech® webcam.
3. During or after drawing the boundaries, participants described the speech of the area they had marked. From the data collected, several reoccurring themes emerged. These themes apply to different, but often times overlapping, speech zones according to the participants.

Final maps were generated electronically using PowerPoint® to outline the speech zones that participants gave. The shapes tool was utilized to mark the regions on a map of Mexico containing state lines only. Many participants spoke about the speech zones, while minimally marking on the map. Because of this, final maps were based on participants' hand-drawn maps in combination with their interviews. Areas grouped together by =50% (at least ten of the nineteen) of participants constituted a major dialect area. Areas grouped together by 45-49% (nine of the nineteen) of participants were marked as sub-regions.

Rather than explicitly asking participants to rate dialects on a pre-constructed scale such as in Preston (1996), the resulting themes arose naturally in the interviews. While scales and speaker ratings can be helpful and insightful, it was important that the values placed on language in the U.S. not be imposed on the participants due to the fact that the culture and context being investigated are not native ones to the researcher.

Normally in this type of task, participants roughly circle areas (cf. Preston 1996; Bucholtz *et al.* 2007) making the present results striking. As mentioned above, the maps did contain state names and boundaries. These were included since participants' familiarity with the map before the task was unknown. This technique has been used in previous perceptual dialectology studies. As Preston (1993: 335) puts it: maps with boundaries should be used, otherwise "folk dialectology research is confounded with folk geography".

## Participant strategies in map-task

Of the thirteen participants who marked their maps, five either traced state lines exactly (n=2) or nearly exactly (n=3). Those who roughly circled areas (n=3) verbally described a speech zone by listing the states that belonged to it. When states appeared to be partially grouped with multiple zones due to an inexact boundary marking, participants either verbally confirmed which speech area the state belonged to or said they did not know or remember what the speech of the state was like. Examples of hand-drawn maps are given in Appendix 2. Areas not mentioned by participants or mentioned as unknown/forgotten were not included in the analysis. When a participant named a state as being a part of a speech area, their verbal description was used even if the map was not marked.

Apart from tracing state lines, there were other surprising map-marking techniques not commonly seen in the literature. Two participants chose to underline state names and differentiate the zones by color of underline only. One speaker used different symbols such as asterisks,

check marks, and circles in each state to signify that its speech was the same as a state with a matching symbol. Of the three participants who used straight lines (through state boundaries), two of them gave verbal descriptions of speech areas that were drastically different from those marked on their maps. One of these participants combined techniques of straight lines and a rough circle. Five participants chose not to mark the map at all and three marked only their home town or state. There were no correlations between not marking maps with home region, education, age, mobility, age at immigration, or years in the U.S. For the reasons given above the final electronic maps were created using both the paper map (if participants marked it) as well as participants' verbal descriptions of the speech in Mexico. Figure 3 gives the major dialect areas perceived by speakers based on final maps. Figure 4 gives how often (in percentages) a state was assigned to its final, major region. States appear in more than one region only if they were evaluated as sub-regions. Two speakers, Adriana and Rebeca from Oaxaca, reported that the Spanish spoken is uniform throughout all of Mexico. Both of these maps were therefore left out.

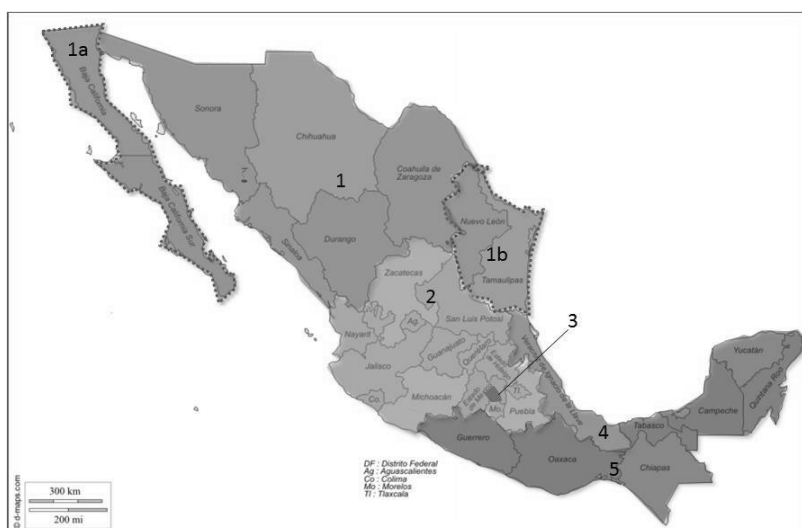


Figure 3. *Major dialect areas perceived*

Region	Assignment Frequency	Region	Assignment Frequency	Region	Assignment Frequency
(1) North	Sonora 94.74%	(2) Central	Aguascalientes 90.91%	(3) Capital DF	64.71%
	Sinaloa 78.95%		Colima 84.62%	(4) Coast Veracruz	52.94%
	Chihuahua 73.68%		Guanajuato 84.62%	(5) South Campeche	100.00%
	Coahuila 71.43%		Hidalgo 84.62%	Yucatán	100.00%
	Durango 57.89%		Zacatecas 84.62%	Quintana Roo	100.00%
	BajaCalí 53.85%		Querétaro 83.33%	Chiapas	92.86%
	BajaCalíSur 53.85%		San Luis Potosí 81.82%	Tabasco	91.67%
	Nuevo León 53.33%		Morelos 80.00%	Oaxaca	88.24%
	Tamaulipas 46.15%		Tlaxcala 70.00%	Guerrero	61.54%
(1a) BajaCalí	BajaCalí 46.15%		Michoacán 68.42%		
	BajaCalíSur 46.15%		Jalisco 64.71%		
(1b) Northeast	Tamaulipas 53.85%		Puebla 58.33%		
	Nuevo León 46.67%		Nayarit 57.89%		
			México 57.14%		

Figure 4. Assignment frequency of states to major dialect regions

## Major dialect areas perceived

As can be seen in the Figures 3 and 4, major dialect areas (based on criterion given in methods) for participants were: 1) North, 2) Central, 3) Capital (aka Distrito Federal, hereafter D.F.), 4) Coast, and 5) South. For this reason, participants are grouped into Northern, Central, D.F., and Southern speakers. Only three states (Campeche, Yucatán, Quintana Roo) were assigned to a region by 100% of participants who mentioned them. Other than these, some states were more agreed upon than others. For example, Sonora was placed in the North by 94% of participants who mentioned it, as opposed to Nuevo León, included with the North by 53% of participants, and as its own Northeast region by 46% of participants. Fifteen participants mentioned Nuevo León in the task, eight calling it North and seven calling it Northeast. Northeast and Baja California appear as subregions as a result of participants being basically split on their classifications.

Those participants who classified Northeast and Baja California as their own regions were generally more mobile or from the North. According to Bucholtz (2007: 348), residents are aware of greater complexity and diversity than nonresidents. This observation is a reason for interviewing Mexican-born participants for this study, as well as a reason to suspect there are finer-grain details present than the ones seen here. While it's not clear whether the Northeast is home to a separate dialect from the current study, findings of Serrano (2009) indicate that the Northwest is indeed separate from the North as a whole. About 1/5 of participants in Serrano's 2009 study also indicated Nuevo León (or Monterrey) as *norteño*, but also its own variety. This indicates that there may indeed be more dialectal zones than the current study found in the North.

## Reoccurring themes

As stated earlier, all of the salient themes found in this study were ones brought up by the interviewees themselves. To follow Preston's model and ask about correctness would be to assume that correctness matters to the Mexican Spanish speaker in the same way that it does to American English speakers, or even at all. Correctness was mentioned by only three of the nineteen participants and is therefore not included. The two participants perceiving uniformity in Mexican Spanish were excluded from the analysis. In order to be included in the discussion as a salient theme, a majority of the speakers must have brought it up. Of the ten themes that were brought up by more than one speaker, two were brought up by a majority of speakers: Language contact and Urban/Rural Speech.

### 1. Language contact

Language contact was by far the most mentioned phenomenon by participants in this task being brought up by fifteen participants. This concept was expressed in various ways, which will be discussed in detail below. Figure 5 shows comments on the language contact in Mexico correlated to the target area. The home region of the speaker who made the comment appears parenthetically after the comment (N=North, C=Central, S=South, and D.F.).



Figure 5. *Language contact map*



Southern and coastal areas of Mexico were often described as having a degree of foreignness to their speech by participants. These areas were described as sounding like South or Central American varieties and sometimes Caribbean. An important difference however, was that when the Spanish was referred to as sounding ‘Guatemalan’, ‘South American,’ etc. the states were labeled as ‘southern’ and when they were ascribed Caribbean qualities they were called ‘coastal’. Comparisons were never made between Caribbean varieties and regions not described as coastal. No blatantly negative views were shared about these ‘other-sounding’ Spanish varieties, but participants are ascribing an ‘other-like’ quality to a variety found in Mexico. These descriptions, along with many to follow, fit into a language ideology contrasting ‘pure, Mexican Spanish’ from other varieties. Hidalgo (1986: 206) also found this to be true of her participants who were loyal to and desired to maintain “‘Mexican Spanish’ as it is presumably utilized in the interior”.

The term dialect is defined by linguists as variation within language which is tied to different factors such as geographic region, social class, etc. (Stockwell 2002: 5). Participants used the term *dialectos* [dialects] to refer to indigenous languages. This was first thought to be a misunderstanding of the task and a confusion of terminology between the linguists’ and non-linguists’ usage, but it became apparent that the presence of these indigenous languages was intertwined with the views held of a given region’s Spanish. If the Spanish spoken in a region had contact with an indigenous language it was mostly considered low prestige.

The other kind of contact discussed by participants was that of English influence. In the current study, the northern states, particularly those along the U.S.-Mexico border, regularly received comments about their heavy influence from the United States and English. Around the border they use “*palabras raras*” [strange words], “*palabras que no tienen sentido*” [words that don’t make sense], and “*palabras que no reconocen en otras partes*” [words that aren’t recognized in other parts]. For one of the northern speakers, María, Spanglish spoken in the Tijuana, Baja California area was explicitly called “*incorrecto*” [incorrect]. She went on to say:

*Para ellos es normal agarrar una frase, por ejemplo en inglés y así literalmente traducirla al español y para ellos es la manera correcta decir, pero es incorrecta en español*

[For them it’s normal to take a phrase, for example in English and literally translate it into Spanish and for them it’s the correct way to say it, but it’s incorrect in Spanish]

Another Northern speaker, Josué, admits that the border area uses “strange words” such as ‘soda’ from English instead of the Spanish *refresco* and the verb *pichar* (from English “to pitch”) rather than the Spanish *invitar* (“to invite”). A central speaker, Javier, attributed this feature to Chicanos only, or those born in the U.S. of Mexican descent.

*Los chicanos ya hablan diferente que nosotros, muchas palabras... pues ya mezclan inglés con español. Muchas palabras que están mezcladas. La mitad en inglés y la mitad en español. Cuando van para México, no les gusta que hablen así*

[Chicanos talk differently than us, a lot of words... Well, they mix English with Spanish. A lot of words that are mixed. Half in English, half in Spanish. When they go to Mexico, they don't like them talking that way]

Hidalgo (1986: 207-208) found that code-switching varieties were seen negatively even by both those who do it. Code-switching is seen as a lack of competence in Spanish resulting in speakers having to ‘resort back to English’. She posits that there appears to be “a subjective need for ethnic identity assertion” thus resulting in code switching and Spanglish varieties as low-status. However, in Montes-Alcalá (2000) generally positive view of code-switching is seen in Spanish-English bilingual youths. Further investigation of this specific variety of Spanish mentioned by Javier can be found in Silva-Corvalán (1996).

## 2. Urban/Rural

The second most occurring theme was that of an urban vs. rural dichotomy mentioned by fourteen participants. The term dichotomy is used because participants described these categories as black and white: two distinct groups in speakers' minds. As with any issue of identity, answers/perceptions vary depending on whom you ask.

### *Ranchero*

Many descriptions of rural speech used the word *ranchero* [‘rancher’, ‘farmer’]. As noted by Farr (2006), *ranchero* is a polyvalent term with both positive and negative connotations. In urban Mexico, it is the equivalent to the English term ‘hillbilly’ and indexes backwardness, lack of modernity, and being uncouth, uncultured, and uneducated. Surprisingly, speakers tended to generalize whole states as either

speaking ‘*ranchero*’ or ‘*de la ciudad*’ [of the city]. For Ricardo, central Mexico was broken into the western half which speaks ‘*ranchero*’ and the eastern half, which includes his home region, where they speak more ‘city’. When asked to describe the differences in how they sound, he said *ranchero* is “*más agudo, el ruido o el sonido*” [a sharper sound or noise] while the city Spanish is “*suave*” [smooth/pleasant].

Farr (2006: 7) posits there has been a tradition in Mexico to valorize all that is *ranchero* as “the real Mexican” and male identity. However, within the dichotomy of urban/rural, rural inhabitants feel their label denies them modernity by those who give it (Salas Carreño 2007). This is seen in María’s response to those who categorize the north as rural:

*Aquí en Nuevo León, en Monterrey, es una de las ciudades más grandes de México con más industria, con más tecnología, muchos avances. Chihuahua es pura industria. Todas las compañías americanas vienen y tienen sus industrias aquí... La gente del estado de México, ellos sienten que son los ‘citadinos’, los de la ciudad, de la metrópoli, la gente con educación. Y todos afuera del estado de México, ellos piensan que somos de provincia, los de los pueblos, la gente que vive en el valle, que hace la agricultura. No todos nos dedicamos a la agricultura, a la ganadería aunque no estemos en el centro del país*

[Here in Nuevo León, in Monterrey, it’s one of the Mexico’s biggest cities with more industry, more technology, many advances. Chihuahua is pure industry. All of the American companies come and have their industries here. The people from Mexico state, they feel like they’re the ‘city folk’, from the city, from the metropolis, the educated people. And they think everyone outside of Mexico State, that we’re from the country, the villages, the people that live in the valley, that farm. Not all of us dedicate ourselves to agriculture or livestock farming even if we don’t live in the central part of the country]



Figure 6. *Comments on areas perceived as ‘ranchero’ or ‘city’*



Figure 7. *Perceived ‘rancho’ and ‘urban’ areas of speech*

## Norteño

A second term used to indicate ruralness specifically in the northern states was *norteño* [lit. northern]. While by its dictionary definition, the term indexes nothing about the speech other than its geographic loca-

tion, it became apparent through the interviews that the meaning was deeper than this. Josué stated that his home state of Nuevo León, along with neighboring states Coahuila and Tamaulipas speak “*más norteno*” [more *norteno*/northern] than the other states in the north. Interestingly, these states are geographically further south than the other states in the North. Josué acknowledged this, while still maintaining that if someone discusses *norteno* Spanish they mean one of those three states. “*Ellos hablan más norteno. Como los de Nashville*” [They speak more *norteno*. Like people from Nashville]. Enrique also said that Tamaulipas and Nuevo León speak a “*norteno regio*” [strong *norteno*] as compared to other northern states he labeled as *norteno*. He described the strong *norteno* as similar to speech in Texas.

Similar to comments on *ranchero* attire in Farr (2006), *nortenos* were described as wearing ‘*botas*,’ ‘*botas vaqueras*’ and ‘*sombreros*’ [boots, cowboy boots and cowboy hats]. While he didn’t specifically use the word *norteno*, Umberto, a participant highly fluent in English, said that the north has more ranches and farms, and for this reason people in the north have an accent that we here would call ‘hillbilly’. For at least the participants in the current study, *norteno* is a less stigmatized, more geographically specific way of saying *ranchero*.

Both of these terms can be used as a positive part of one’s identity, but outsiders would most likely see it as a negative characteristic. Both *norteno* and *ranchero* index a sense of ruralness.

Northern speaker María’s comments above demonstrate this, and non-northerners confirmed it.

Almost as if it were in response to her statement, Timoteo had the following to say about non-D.F. natives: “*Todo el resto es provincia*” [All the rest is country]. According to this comment and others, all indigenous groups and those non-indigenous groups not living in an urbanized area are seen as rural. Due to this, we see overlap in regions labeled as ‘*ranchero*’ and ‘indigenous’. For some speakers they are separate categories, and for others it’s all lumped into one.

## *Chilango*

Another term that is highly salient for Mexican speakers is *chilango*. According to the Royal Spanish Academy’s dictionary *chilango* is a colloquial word for one from the state of Mexico or something/someone that pertains to the capital city, Distrito Federal (D.F.). While this word was most attributed to the speech of the capital city, it was also extended to various states surrounding D.F. and Mexico. Figure 8 illustrates participants’ perceptions of *chilango* speech. The chart found within Figure 8 reports the home area of the speaker who called the corresponding

area ‘*chilango*.’ Generally, the closer one lives to the capital, the narrower his/her concept of *chilango* becomes. As seen in Figure 8, 4/5 Central speakers and the one southern speaker who mentioned *chilango* consider only the city of D.F. to have *chilango* speech (area 4 representing the governmental border of D.F.). The two speakers from D.F. even went further to say that the ‘real’ *chilangos* are those in the central part of D.F., where they’re from. Timoteo self-identifies as a *chilango* and does not view this term as offensive, but he is aware that others use it offensively and aren’t fond of what they associate with *chilango*.

*Muchos llegan al D.F., en las orillas. Roban y quitan lo que tienen. Ellos se van. No llegan a la ciudad de México, llegan a las orillas, de los lados. Y dicen que los ‘chilangos’ son robateros, pero no somos*  
[Many people arrive in D.F., to the outer-edges. People rob them and take what they have. Then they leave. They don’t get to Mexico City, they get to the out-skirts, the edges. And they say that ‘*chilangos*’ are robbers, but we’re not]



Figure 8. Perceived areas of chilango speech

Those who self-identify as *chilango* take pride in the term. Not all outsiders are aware that its use is accepted within the group. María said that those that are referred to as *chilango* don’t use the term because “[e]llos piensan que es ofensivo” [they think it’s offensive]. Timoteo went

on to say that in Michoacán they almost talk the same as in D.F. because they wish that they talked like them. Alberto, from Michoacán, said of ‘*chilangos*’ “*Ellos no saben cómo hablar*” [They don’t know how to talk]. Another Michoacán speaker, Martín, described *chilango* speech as “*bien naco, como los mollos\* de aquí*” [really trashy, like the blacks\* here]. Both Alberto and Javier agreed that while many people think *chilango* means someone from D.F., it’s really someone who moved to D.F. D.F. is “a mix of everything, the whole race.” Those who reported D.F. as their home region hold the concept of *chilango* as part of their identity. Non-D.F. residents who talked about *chilango* typically didn’t respect this concept and challenged this identity as being based on a misconception.

*Chilango* can be indexed through D.F.-residents’ special lexicon and heavy use of slang and profanity. Likewise, speakers may (whether consciously or not) index not being *chilango* through their lack of use of the special lexicon. Enrique said that he’s always told he doesn’t sound *chilango*. No one knows he is from D.F. until he tells them. They say he sounds like he is from Jalisco, which as far as this study can conclude is a fairly unmarked accent in Mexico. He does not find the term *chilango* offensive, and it is unclear whether he purposely indexes being not-*chilango*. His ties to *chilango* as an identity are weaker than other D.F. speakers, perhaps due to his high mobility (only participant to have lived in a country other than Mexico and the U.S.) and higher education (only participant with a degree currently using it). We see the opposite phenomenon occur in Selvin. Below is his report of what others from Michoacán say about his speech:

*Ellos dicen que yo soy chilango. Pero no soy chilango yo. Que yo hablo así. Sí, dicen pero no. Yo soy de Michoacán*

[They say that I’m *chilango*. But I’m not *chilango*. They say I talk like one. Yeah, that’s what they say but it’s not true. I’m from Michoacán]

Selvin clearly doesn’t want to index belonging to this group, because he feels he is part of another group: Michoacanos. However, the Michoacanos don’t accept him as talking like they do. It was unclear why Selvin would have been perceived as *chilango*, since he had never lived in/near the capital and didn’t report many friends from D.F. This could be a different interpretation by speakers of the rural/urban divide since Selvin said the difference was that others in Michoacán face a different problem: being viewed as ‘*ranchero*’. From Selvin’s experience, in Michoacán, one can either sound ‘*ranchero*’ or in his case ‘*chilango*.’

## Context

### Status of population as migrants

The views shared in this study were from a very specific population: Mexican-born speakers who immigrated to the U.S. While a basis of their views of the Spanish spoken in Mexico were most likely formed before crossing the border, the context of their status as migrants does show up in various ways. Since participants were chosen through a snowball sampling, many of these participants know and interact with one another. Therefore, they are exposed to speakers from other areas more than they were in Mexico. This gives speakers opportunity to form new opinions on speech varieties as well as confirm or change previous opinions. For Martín, a reason not to share his opinion on how Oaxacans speak was to keep a Oaxacan co-worker from getting upset, in case she ever heard what he had said. Another instance of change was seen in Javier's thoughts on Chicanos mixing Spanish and English. "*Cuando van para México, no les gusta que hablen así. Yo cuando estaba allá tampoco*" [When they go to Mexico, they don't like them talking that way. When I was there, I didn't either]. He went on to say that now it doesn't really matter to him if they talk 'half and half'. He didn't admit to doing it himself, but either way he's still aware of the stigma attached to it. Not only does this migrant population have attitudes about Mexico's speech, but they're now situated within a new context of views shaped by U.S. experiences. There were no correlations with level of integration into U.S. culture (although this is a difficult aspect to measure), time lived in the U.S., or age of arrival with comparisons to English varieties. One aspect that was not investigated for the current study, but would be of interest in future studies is that of the effect of language shift toward English in the attitudes of second generation immigrants (as defined in Rivera Mills 2000: 23).

### The role of race

Two speakers made comparisons between speeches of specific populations in Mexico to African American varieties here in the U.S. This same result occurred in Galindo's 1996 study of language attitudes on the border where certain varieties were equated to black speech. Enrique said that certain coastal dialects "forget to pronounce the <s> sounds. It's similar to the way African Americans speak in English" while Martín described *chilango* speech as "*bien naco, como los mollos\* de aquí*" [really trashy, like the blacks\* here]. Comparisons to this popula-



tion as a speech community illustrate an awareness of speech communities being able to exist across groups, not just physical space. This is relevant as more enregistered Mexican Spanish dialects (*chilango*, *norteño*, etc.) show up in the U.S.

In Roth-Gordon's (2009) work, the use of slang is tied to blackness and marginality (p.64). In this study, slang and profanity use were almost exclusively associated with *chilango*, which is tied to marginality but a lack of race. While Mexicans speak of *la raza* [the race] as their uniting, Mexican identity they also identify with their individual state ties. D.F. residents are no exception, but others assert that their identity claims are not valid. This challenge to their D.F. identity is seen when others say that they are a 'mix of everything,' 'a mix of the whole race,' and challenge the very definition of their group term '*chilango*'. This is merely another way of stigmatizing the group. Jane Hill (1999) talks about whiteness in the U.S. being unmarked and invisible. Lack of race in the case of D.F. residents is not unmarked. Not having ties to a specific race is indeed marked and stigmatized.

Although non-*chilangos* denied the tie of *chilango* to a specific race, the term has and will most likely continue to gain more group/social ties than geographical ones, especially as the population migrates and settles in different areas of the U.S.

## Major dialectal groups

Many themes were discussed throughout this paper as individual topics, yet it was nearly impossible to keep themes from bleeding over into the other categories. This reflects the fact that in reality, they form a complex interwoven set of ideas in the minds of the Mexican speakers interviewed for this study. Despite the messiness of analyzing such attitudes, a major division can be concluded from the interviews: Rural vs. Urban. Within this division, the major groups of *Ranchero*, Indigenous, and Coastal fall under Rural and *Chilangos* and Urbanized Speakers (Non-*Chilangos*) fall under Urban. The *Costeños* or Coastal group was not as salient as the other four groups. Some participants collapsed Coastal and Indigenous into one Rural sub-group. The break-down of groups in Mexican Spanish perceptual dialectology is represented in Figure 9.

Groups included were ones specifically mentioned by a majority of participants as different ways people can speak Spanish in Mexico. Spanglish varieties may constitute a separate group, but from the current data it is unclear whether this is the case for Mexican speakers, and if so, where they would fall in the hierarchy. It is also unclear whether they would be viewed as rural (surrounded by/intermixed with

'*ranchero*' and '*norteño*' comments) or urban (due to contact with English through industrialization).

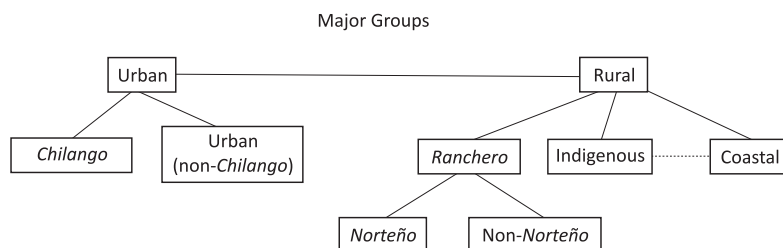


Figure 9. *Major groups in Mexican Spanish perceptual dialectology*

Rural dialects are lower-status than urban ones, and in this case it would appear that indigenous populations' dialects are lower-status than *ranchero* dialects. *Ranchero* can be divided into the subgroups of *norteño* and non-*norteño*. Both were described as being *ranchero*, but no one grouped the two regions together as one large *ranchero* speech area. It is unclear from the current data whether one of them is higher-esteem than the other.

The presence of urbanness in the north was defended by a Northern participant, but it was never asserted that urban and rural can coexist, or that individuals can cross these lines. Even if northerners can modernize themselves through industry, they still form a distinct linguistic community for speakers (even for Northern speaker María who brought up the presence of industry in the North). Likewise, one cannot be *chilango* and *ranchero* or *chilango* and urban (non-*chilango*). If a speaker like Enrique is from D.F., but sounds like he is from Jalisco, he's by his own admission rejected as a 'true *chilango*' by other D.F. natives.

In hierarchical terms, as Hidalgo (1986) predicted, the urbanized dialects are viewed as more prestigious in Mexico. As Emilia said "*en Jalisco pues... Yo soy de Jalisco, siento que [...] hablamos [...] no se nota tanto el acento que tenemos*" [In Jalisco, well... I'm from Jalisco and I feel we speak... the accent we have isn't really noticeable]. Not only is the accent 'not noticeable,' her pauses indicate her struggle to put a description of it into words. This accent that is associated with urbanized central Mexico is viewed as unmarked, and by some speakers was described as 'average Spanish' (Enrique, D.F.) or 'standard' (Javier, Michoacán). Emilia goes on to say "[*p*]ero la gente ya educada, y que ha estudiado... de la alta sociedad, hablan más educados y no se le nota tanto el acento" [But the people who're now educated, who have studied and are high society, they speak more educated and the accent isn't so noticeable]. She may be equating

her region with educated speakers, or perhaps the only way to rid one's speech of a marked accent is through education. As seen earlier in the case of Enrique, people say he sounds like he's from Jalisco rather than D.F. Enrique was one of the most educated participants in the study. Not only did he receive his degree, but he was the only college graduate to be using his degree in his current job. Further research is needed in order to tease apart the role of education in having an unmarked accent. *Chilangos* would most likely have higher status than the rural groups, but it was unclear from the interviews in this study.

## Where is the worst Spanish spoken?

Oaxaca received the most pejorative comments of any state or area of Mexico. Of the indigenous groups, Oaxaca was the most mentioned area having speech influenced by 'dialectos' or indigenous languages. Oaxaca natives view the indigenous languages as part of their culture, but are also aware that the contact and code-switching that result are looked down on by outsiders. Manuel felt the need to defend Oaxaca: "*También somos civilizados, pero no nos dejan perder la cultura*" [We're civilized too, but Oaxaca doesn't let us lose our culture]. Perhaps because Oaxaca is the area with the most indigenous languages, it is the target of the most critique. Guillermo said "*En Oaxaca se habla feo. Hablan más [...] no como indios pero sí [...]*" [In Oaxaca, they talk ugly. They talk more...not like Indians, but yeah...]. Fellow Michoacano Alberto said "*Solo que los oaxaqueños son gente bajita. Chaparros, prietos, y feos. Pero, así son ellos*" [It's just that Oaxacans are little short people. Short, dark-skinned, and ugly. But, that's how they are]. María talked about the vowel raising phenomena (Lope Blanch 1979) found in Oaxaca and described it as "*mala pronunciación*" [bad pronunciation], probably due, she said, to the illiteracy and ignorance that spread there.

Oaxacans have long felt the brunt of discrimination in Mexico, according to Dr. Cohen who studies Mexican-U.S. migration, specifically that of indigenous communities in Oaxaca. This discrimination may be the reason behind two Oaxacan female participants, Adriana and Rebeca, stating that all of Mexico talks the same. Hidalgo (1982: 205) would call this 'dialect deafness', which she says tends to be a feature of less educated speakers. However, there was no correlation in this study with education level and perceptions of dialects. According to Dr. Cohen, Oaxacans have been discriminated against for so long that they've learned to just ignore it (personal communication, 04/03/2012). More history of discrimination towards Mexico's indigenous communities is presented in Teun Van Dijk (2009).

If a person knows that they are constantly evaluated negatively, they may not want to discuss their own speech nor that of their compatriots who look down on their speech. Not talking about others' pejorative views of them and simply stating that everyone talks the same may be Adriana and Rebeca's way of dealing with the discrimination and to an extent, ignoring it. It was unclear why this occurred in female Oaxacan participants and not male. Male Oaxacans reacted by discussing all dialects other than their own ( $n=1$ ), minimally commented on the speech of Oaxaca and focused on other dialects ( $n=1$ ), or defended Oaxaca's multilingualism ( $n=1$ ). Further comments on Spanish in Oaxaca are given in Figure 10. The comments seen were attributed to Oaxaca in general; the position of them on the map is not relevant. It should be noted that all Southern speakers are from Oaxaca.

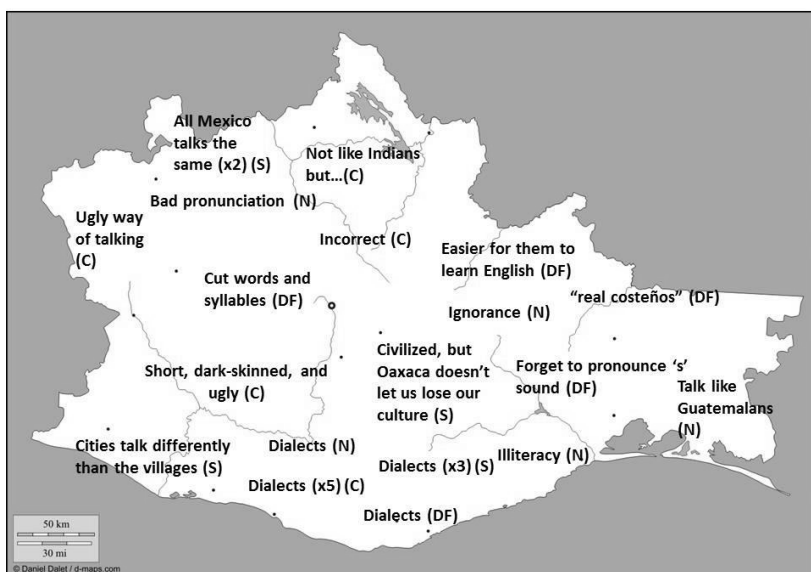


Figure 10. *Comments on Oaxacan Spanish*

## Conclusions

In this study, basic starting points for the speech areas in Mexico were determined. Attitudes associated with those areas were gathered through individual interviews. The Spanish of central Mexico, according to the speakers interviewed, is seen as unmarked and the most prestigious in Mexico. There is a language ideology that any contact with other languages makes the variety lower in prestige (as seen here with English

in the north and indigenous languages in the south). Slang and profanity form part of the identity of self-identifying *chilangos*, while non-*chilangos* do not report their own use of them.

Major groups found included subcategories of Rural and Urban speakers: *chilango*, urbanized (non-*chilango*), *ranchero* (*norteños* and non-*norteños*), indigenous, and coastal. Of these, enregistered dialects include *chilango*, *norteño*, and coastal. This conclusion is based on the definition of enregisterment given in Agha (“processes whereby distinct forms of speech come to be socially recognized as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users”, 2005: 38). These dialects were a reality in speakers’ minds and were easily talked about. All three were imitated by speakers without solicitation (by eight, eight, and five speakers respectively). No one had difficulty talking about indigenous dialects, but they were never claimed to form a single, uniform dialect. No one imitated indigenous dialects, but some lexical differences were given and attributed to influence of ‘dialectos’. No one could imitate the non-*chilango*, urban dialect. Those who claimed to speak it described it as ‘normal’ (n=4) while no other speaker described his/her own dialect this way. Lexical differences given for other regions were often compared to the ‘normal’ word used in this variety. A non-*norteño*, *ranchero* dialect was never imitated. Given the results, for speakers in this study *Chilango* and *Norteño* varieties are the most marked, closely followed by coastal varieties.

Since this is one of the first studies of its kind, it establishes a point of departure for research to come. It helps to form a basis of concepts important to the Mexican Spanish speaker, through which many more concepts important to assigning social value to Spanish in Mexico can arise and be discovered. Reiterating Farr’s point, a scarce amount of research has been done on language use among Mexican-origin groups, in spite of the fact that they are one of the fastest-growing populations in the U.S. Most of the research focusing on this has concentrated on the Southwest. While of interest, the population in the Southwest holds entirely different questions for researchers due to its distinct history. Research like that of the current study, Farr (2006), and Matus-Mendoza (2002) seek to spark investigation in the area of the Midwest where new and interesting linguistic phenomena are taking place. The more research that is done on this area, the more that will be understood of this diverse set of speech communities living in the U.S. setting.

Sarah Stockler  
Ohio State University  
43210 – Columbus (Ohio) – U.S.  
stockler.2@buckeyemail.osu.edu

Recepción: 19/12/2014; Aceptación: 24/03/2015

## Notes

Translations done by the author.

An orthographic transcription was used for quotes.

‘[...]’ indicates a pause in speech.

‘...’ indicates an omission

\*this term is pejorative in Spanish

## References

- Agha, Asif. 2005. “Voice, footing, enregisterment”. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 15:1. 38-59.
- Bucholtz, Mary, Nancy Bermudez, Victor Fung, Lisa Edwards and Rosalva Vargas. 2007. “Hella nor Cal or totally so Cal? The perceptual dialectology of California”. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 35. 325-52.
- Real Academia Española. 2001. *Diccionario de la lengua española. Vigésima segunda edición*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe.
- Cohen, Jeffrey H. 2004. *The culture of migration in southern Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Erdősóvá, Zuzana. 2011. “El español de México en los ojos de sus hablantes. Un estudio desde la sociolingüística y la dialectología perceptiva”. *Lengua y voz*, 1:1. 57-81.
- Farr, Marcia. 2006. *Rancheros in Chicagoacán: language and identity in a transnational community*. Austin: University of Texas Press
- Figueroa, Neysa Luz. 2003. “U. S.’ and ‘Them’: a study of the language attitudes of speakers of high- and low-prestige varieties of Spanish toward ‘world spanishes’”. *A dissertation abstracts international: The humanities and social sciences*. 1-129.
- Flores, Nancy de la Zerda. 1975. “Mexican American’s evaluations of spoken Spanish and English”. *Speech Monographs*, 42:2. 91-98.
- Galindo, D. Letticia. 1996. “Language use and language attitudes: a study of border women”. *Bilingual Review*, 21:1. 5-17.
- Hidalgo, Margarita. 1986. “Language contact, language loyalty, and language prejudice on the mexican border”. *Language in Society*, 15:2. 193-220.
- Hill, Jane H. 1999. “Language, race, and white public space”. *American Anthropologist*, 100:3. 680-689.
- Johnstone, Barbara. 2009. “Pittsburghese shirts: commodification and the enregisterment of an urban dialect”. *American Speech*, 84:2. 157-175.
- Lope Blanch, Juan Manuel. 1979. “Sobre el tratamiento de -e, -o finales en el español de México”. In: *Investigaciones sobre dialectología mexicana*, Juan Manuel Lope Blanch (ed.), 35-40. México, D. F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Lope Blanch, Juan Manuel. 1999. “Spanish in the new world”. *Analecta Malacitana*, 22:2. 535-548.
- Lope Blanch, Juan Manuel, Antonio Alcalá and Raúl Ávila. 1990. *Atlas lingüístico de México*. México, D.F.: El Colegio de México/Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Martín Butragueño, Pedro. 2014. “La división dialectal del español mexicano”. In: *Historia Sociolingüística de México*, Rebeca Barriga Villanueva y Pedro Martín Butragueño (dirs.), vol. III, 1355-1409. México: El Colegio de México.
- Matus-Mendoza, Mariadelaluz. 2002. *Linguistic variation in Mexican Spanish as spoken in two communities - Moroleón, Mexico and Kennett Square, Pennsylvania*. Lewistown: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Montes-Alcalá, Cecilia. 2000. “Attitudes towards oral and written codeswitching in Spanish-English Bilingual”. In: *Research on Spanish in the U.S.*, Ana Roca (ed.), 218-227. Somerville: Cascadilla Press.

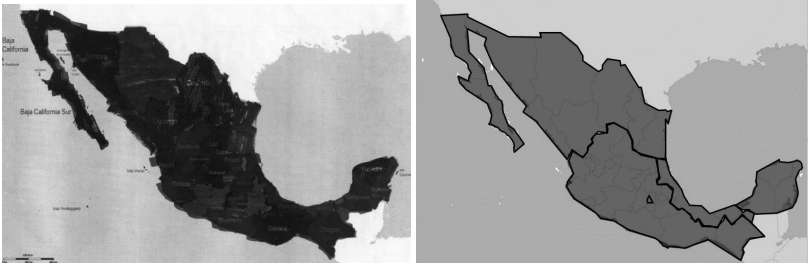
- Morúa Leyva, María del Carmen and Julio César Serrano Morales. 2004. "2000 kilómetros de por medio. Dialectología perceptual contrastiva del español mexicano". In: *Memorias del VII Encuentro Internacional de Lingüística en el Noroeste*, María del Carmen Morúa Leyva and Rosa María Ortiz Ciscomani (eds.), vol. 2, 253-276. Hermosillo: Universidad de Sonora.
- Podesva, Robert J. 2011. "The California vowel shift and gay identity". *American Speech*, 86:1. 32-51.
- Preston, Dennis. 1993. "Folk dialectology". In *American dialect research*, Dennis Preston (ed.), 333-377. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Preston, Dennis. 1996. "Where the worst English is spoken". In: *Focus on the USA*, Edgar W. Schneider (ed.), 297-360. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Rivera-Mills, Susana Victoria. 2000. *New perspectives on current sociolinguistic knowledge with regard to language use, proficiency, and attitudes among Hispanics in the United States: the case of a rural Northern California Community*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Roth-Gordon, Jennifer. 2009. "The Language that came down Hill: slang, crime, and citizenship in Rio de Janeiro". *American Anthropologist*, 111:1, 57-68.
- Salas Carreño, Guillermo. 2007. "Narrativas de modernidad e ideologías de diferenciación social". *Crónicas urbanas*, 12. 107-122.
- Santa Ana, Otto and Claudia Parodi. 1998. "Modeling the speech community: Configuration and variable types in the Mexican Spanish setting". *Language in Society*, 27:1. 23-51.
- Serrano, Julio. 2009. "¿Existe el Noroeste mexicano como zona dialectal? Un acercamiento perceptual". In: *Lengua, literatura y región*, Everardo Mendoza Guerrero, Maritza López Berríos and Ilda Elizabeth Moreno Rojas (coords.), 107-130. Culiacán: Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa.
- Serrano, Julio. (Forthcoming). "¿Cuántos dialectos del español existen en México? Un ensayo de dialectología perceptual". In: *La lingüística contemporánea en México*, Niktelol Palacios C. (ed.). Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.
- Silva-Corvalán, Carmen. 1996. "Conflicting loyalties". In: *Language contact and change, Spanish in Los Angeles*, Carmen Silva-Corvalán (ed.), 168-206. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stockwell, Peter. 2002. *Sociolinguistics: A resource book for students*. London: Routledge.
- Van Dijk, Teun. 2009. *Racism and discourse in Latin America*. New York; London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Appendix 1

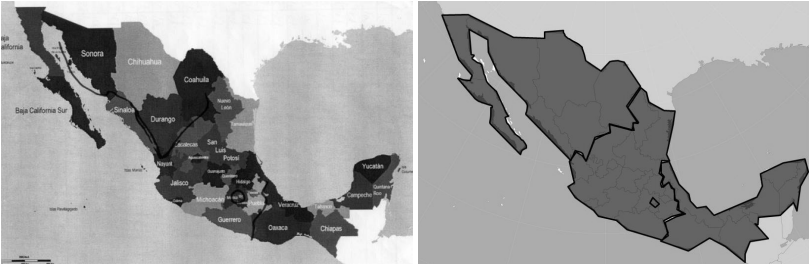
Home region	Speaker	Age	Marital Status	Spouse's home area	Parents' Home Area	Friends' Home Area(s)	Edu Level	Reported languages spoken
North	Maria	41	S	N/A	Ciudad Obregón, Sonora	Sonora	Graduated college	Spanish, English
	Josué	39	M	Mexico	Mexico, Rio Grande, TX	Mexico, Pachuca	Some college	Spanish, English
Central	Ricardo	20	S	N/A	Querétaro, Guanajuato	Michoacán	High school	Spanish, English
	Julio	30	S	N/A	Guadalajara, Jalisco, MX	everywhere	Technical school	Spanish, English
	Emilia	26	S	N/A	Guadalajara, Jalisco, MX	Mexico	High school	Spanish, English
	Lorena	38	M	Jalisco	Mexico	Mexico	Graduated college	Spanish, English
	Javier	26	M	Mexico	declined to answer	Michoacán, Jalisco	Some high school	Spanish, some English
	Juan Luis	31	D	ex=US	La piedad, Michoacán	La piedad	Some primary school	Spanish, English
	Guillermo	24	S	N/A	La piedad, Michoacán	US	Some high school	Spanish
	Martín	28	S	N/A	Michoacán	Michoacán	No formal schooling	Spanish, some English
	Selvin	32	M	Guanajuato	Mexico	different states	High school	Spanish
	Alberto	27	M	Michoacán	Michoacán	Michoacán	High school	Spanish, English
DF	Valentina	31	S	N/A	Mexico	Mexico	High school	Spanish
	Enrique	34	S	N/A	DF	DF	Graduated college	Spanish, English, German
	Diego	36	D	ex=US	DF, Michoacán	DF	High school	Spanish, some English
	Timoteo	39	M	Mexico State	DF	DF	Primary school	Spanish
South	Manuel	31	S	N/A	Oaxaca	Mexico	High school	Spanish, Zapotec, English
	Rebeca	33	M	Oaxaca	Oaxaca	Oaxaca	Primary school	Spanish, some English
	Adriana	39	M	Mexico	Mexico	Mexico	Primary school	Spanish
	Umberto	23	S	N/A	Oaxaca	Pachuca, Mexico	High school	Spanish, English
	Jesus	27	S	N/A	Oaxaca, Guerrero	everywhere	Some college	Spanish

Additional biographical information of participants

Appendix 2

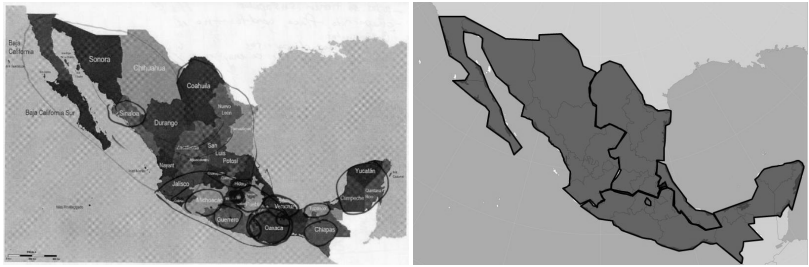


Maps 1a & 1b. Alberto’s hand-drawn and electronic maps  
Technique: Exact tracing of state lines/coloring in states

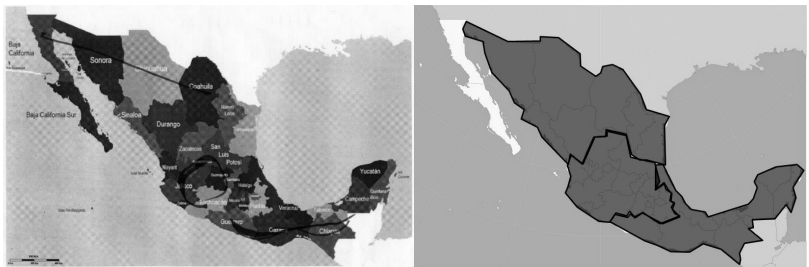


Maps 2a & 2b. Umberto’s hand-drawn and electronic maps  
Technique: Nearly exact tracing of state lines

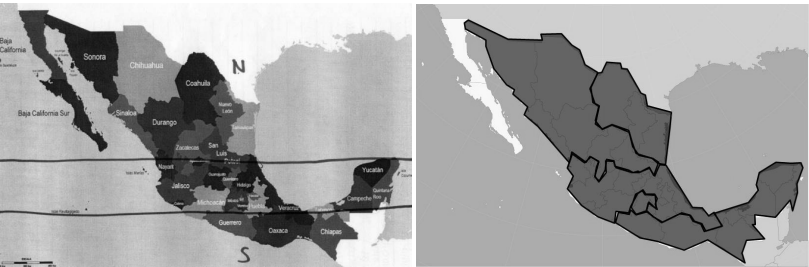




Maps 3a & 3b. *Manuel's hand-drawn and electronic maps*  
Technique: Roughly circled areas



Maps 4a & 4b. *Juan Luis' hand-drawn and electronic maps*  
Technique: Straight lines and rough circle



Maps 5a & 5b. *Josué's hand-drawn and electronic maps*  
Technique: Straight lines